WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

1. A computer-implemented method for processing a search query received from a user, comprising:

(a) identifying, within each of a plurality of categories, a set of items that satisfy the search query;

(b) using at least the sets of items identified in (a) to determine category significance levels that indicate, for each of the plurality of categories, a level of significance of the category to the query; and

(c) presenting the plurality of categories to the user, together with associated items that satisfy the search query, in a display order which depends upon the category significance levels determined in (b).

2. The method as in Claim 1, wherein (c) further comprises determining the display order based on a profile of the user.

3. The method as in Claim 1, wherein (b) comprises:

determining, for at least one category of the plurality of the categories, item popularity scores for the corresponding set of items that satisfy the query; and

using the item popularity scores to determine the category significance level for the category.

4. The method as in Claim 3, wherein the item popularity scores are based on at least one type of user activity that evidences user affinities for particular items.

5. The method as in Claim 4, wherein the at least one type of user activity comprises at least one of the following: (i) selecting an item from a list of search results, (ii) placing an item in a shopping cart, and (iii) purchasing an item.
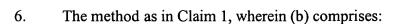
6.   The method as in Claim 1, wherein (b) comprises:

determining, for at least one category of the plurality of the categories, a number of items that satisfy the query; and

generating for the category a score which is based on at least said number of items that satisfy the query relative to a total number of items within the category.

7.   The method as in Claim 1, wherein (c) comprises displaying, for at least one of the plurality of categories, only a selected subset of the items that satisfy the query.

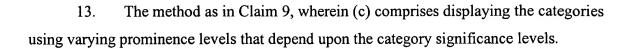8.   The method as in Claim 1, wherein the items include products.

9.   A computer-implemented method of processing a search query received from a user, comprising:

(a)   identifying, within each of a plurality of categories, items that satisfy the search query;

(b)   determining, for each of the plurality of categories, a level of significance of the category to the query; and

(c)   displaying the plurality of categories and associated items to the user according to at least the category significance levels determined in (b).

10.   The method as in Claim 9, wherein (c) comprises displaying the categories in a display order which depends upon the category significance levels.

11.   The method as in Claim 10, wherein (c) comprises displaying categories from highest to lowest category significance level.

12.   The method as in Claim 10, wherein (c) further comprises determining the display order based on a profile of the user.

13. The method as in Claim 9, wherein (c) comprises displaying the categories using varying prominence levels that depend upon the category significance levels.

14. The method as in Claim 9, wherein (b) comprises:

determining, for at least one category of the plurality of the categories, item popularity scores for items that satisfy the query; and
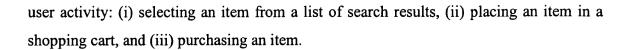
using the item popularity scores to determine the category significance level for the category.

15. The method as in Claim 14, wherein the item popularity scores are based on at least one type of user activity that evidences user affinities for particular items.

16. The method as in Claim 9, further comprising determining whether the query is satisfied by any web pages that, based on a set of rules, have been determined to within a selected level of confidence to include product offerings.

17. A search engine system, comprising:

a repository of items that are arranged within categories; and

a query server that at least (a) identifies, within each of multiple categories of the repository, items that satisfy a search query received from a user, (b) for each of the multiple categories, determines a level of significance of the category to the query, and (c) displays the multiple categories to the user in a display order which depends upon the category significance levels.

18. The search engine system as in Claim 17, wherein the query server determines the significance levels based on at least popularity levels of items that satisfy the query.

19. The search engine system as in Claim 17, further comprising a component that determines the item popularity levels based on at least one of the following types of

user activity: (i) selecting an item from a list of search results, (ii) placing an item in a shopping cart, and (iii) purchasing an item.

20.   The search engine system as in Claim 17, wherein the query server further selects the display order based on a profile of the user.

21.   The search engine system as in Claim 17, wherein the repository comprises a least one database of products sold by a merchant.